

MENDOCINO COUNTY (MNG) — The Alex Rorabaugh Center gymnasium on South State Street is getting its finishing touches so children can get down to the business of playing.

Organizers plan to have the gym open to the public after a grand opening in February.

"We're 2-percent from finishing a \$9 million, 12-year project," said Marvin Trotter, president of the board of directors that has orchestrated fundraising and construction since the project began as an idea.

The 10,000-square-foot gym, which reaches a height of 50 feet at the apex of its vaulted ceiling, will be named the Beckstoffer Gymnasium in honor of winegrape grower Andy Beckstoffer's recent \$200,000 donation, which organizers said helped give the gym a much-needed push toward the finish line.

"We've been in Mendocino County for a long time and we try to give anytime we can. It's a wonderful opportunity for us. We are always glad to help when it comes to education and children. Having the facility named after us shows that we care. It is something our employees will take some pride in. It shows that the grape growers and wineries do their part, too. We will be there for grand opening," Beckstoffer said on Tuesday.

"It allowed us to go out to bid to complete the gymnasium," Trotter said, referring to the third and final phase of construction, which began in June. "We were within reach of the finish."

The gym just had a self-leveling cement floor poured two weeks ago and will soon have layers of cross-cut wood installed over that. Next comes what board exec-

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utive director Richard Shoemaker says looks like a quarter-inch mat made of finely ground tires. On top of that there will be a layer of firm rubber that will be overlaid with the finish, a multi-purpose surface that can be used not only for basketball and volleyball but for dances, everyday play, conventions and even indoor hockey.

"The neat part is, the elementary school will use it on rainy days and really hot days, or smoky days and (with) this kind of floor ... they don't necessarily have to be super, super careful with it," Shoemaker said, contrasting the flooring with more typical gymnasium flooring that requires users to only wear certain types of shoes.

Mendocino College has already expressed a desire to hold women's basketball tournaments at the gym, which will also be available for the Boys and Girls Club of Ukiah, housed at the center, during the day.

Large storage rooms were built to store sports equipment and other necessities, giving the gym an added functionality. It also features a stage that opens on the elementary school's caf-

eteria on one side, connecting the two rooms when their respective metal gates are raised.

Also being installed is an eight-foot tall plastic cover around the bottom of the gym's walls.

The finishing touches mean the gym is almost ready for its doubtless long list of events to come: college basketball tournaments, student dances, conventions and everyday use as the Grace Hudson Elementary School gym, among others.

But it didn't get there without a lot of help from the community, organizers note. Of the \$9 million spent on the gym, \$2 million came from local donors, according to Trotter.

The community's contribution doesn't include the money from what he called a "unique collaboration" between the city of Ukiah, county of Mendocino and Ukiah Unified School District, that each contributed \$1 million to the gym's completion.

Beckstoffer, whose name will grace the gymnasium, is a leader in the winegrape industry, according to Shoemaker, holding about 1,000 acres in

each of three counties: Mendocino, Lake and Napa.

Shoemaker said Beckstoffer and his wife decided to contribute to the ARC after they helped build a similar facility in St. Helena and were honored there as citizens of the year.

The recreation center, which also includes the Boys and Girls Club of Ukiah, takes its name from Alex Rorabaugh, a Pennsylvania man who came to Mendocino County and picked pears in Hopland, then opened a saw mill with two Swedish men in Yorkville, according to Trotter. He made his fortune in the stock market, and, impressed at how much wood was in the gym's shell about five years ago, before its interior was complete, Rorabaugh gave \$550,000 to the project, Trotter said.

That donation allowed organizers to get matching funds from private foundations, leveraging enough money to finish the community center that houses the Boys and Girls Club, with money left over to work on the gym, according to Trotter.

He said Rorabaugh opened his saw mill before chain saws prevailed and instead used 12-foot manual saws to cut his lumber.

"He was a hard-working man his whole life," Trotter said. "He felt (the recreation center) was something that was really important for kids, to give them something positive to do."

Bob and Suzie Hardie, longtime Mendocino County residents, felt the same. They've given nearly \$40,000 to the project over the years.

"We just felt that it was something that would enrich our community, the children, Ukiah, this end of town — I can go on and on with all the good things this is going to do," Bob Hardie said.